

Testimony of the Walter Johnson Cluster

MCPS Operating Budget

Montgomery County Board of Education

January 13, 2020

President Evans, Members of the Board, Dr. Smith:

My name is Sara Cortes and I am pleased to submit this written testimony on behalf of the Walter Johnson Cluster of PTAs. It's an interesting time to be a Montgomery County parent, particularly for someone, like me, who has always taken an interest in issues facing our public schools. Advocacy is everywhere in Montgomery County, and passion is high about questions of how we draw the lines that populate the more than 200 school buildings - with more to come - across the county.

But tonight is not about that debate, or at least not directly. It is, in my view, about something far more important. It is about how we support, grow and best utilize MCPS's greatest asset - its staff. No matter what the building, it's the teachers, administrators, counselors, operations and security personnel, bus drivers, and planning staff that are the touchstone of schools and that will create a thriving and safe learning environment for our children.

The Walter Johnson Cluster supports the Superintendent's proposed budget, and we are grateful to Dr. Smith for continuing to prioritize investment in our County's schools. Our County has welcomed an average of a high school's worth of new students each year for the last decade, and many of these new students live in the WJ Cluster. So, we thank you for recognizing that we must keep pace with increased enrollment by providing increased revenues, with many increases in this budget going to maintain at least the same level of service for an ever-growing population of children. We have several requests about the budget with 3 key themes, or "keys to success" - (1) the need to recognize the unique challenges of large and overcrowded schools; (2) the importance of special education resources; (3) the physical and emotional safety of our students; and (4) the need to plan for the future.

Key to Success 1: Recognizing that large schools - particularly overcrowded schools - need different operational and administrative support than small schools.

As you know, overcrowding is indeed the foremost issue facing our Cluster, and impacts from overcapacity are not just felt on the capital side of the budget, but also permeate the operating budget. Thus, our first key to success is this: Staffing as well as buildings must keep pace with growth. Many of our schools exceed, or soon will exceed, the MCPS recommended school size. We ask that the Board evaluate whether or not schools facing substantial enrollment pressures are staffed adequately, to meet this challenge. We believe that requires a fresh look at the formulas for determining class size, counselors and administrative support. Simply put, large schools have different staffing needs than small schools.

Methodologies determining school staffing: Efforts that increase the number of teachers and assistants in classrooms are hugely beneficial to students, particularly students in overcrowded schools, which in many cases have both large class sizes and physical building challenges. While the Cluster appreciates the County-wide focus on elementary school class size reduction, and also appreciates the review of class sizes undertaken last year, we believe MCPS should look more holistically at its current formulas for determining other staff for large schools. First, we continue to believe that a student/teacher ratio metric, as opposed to the more traditional class size, could be a useful way to address class size issues. Additionally, we ask that the Board and MCPS consider whether the formula for allocating paraeducators to schools may need to be modernized to take into account the larger class sizes that naturally come with increased growth in schools until capacity issues can be addressed. The WJ Cluster believes that if there is to be an increased focus on Human Capital, that an increase in well-trained teachers AND qualified paraeducators at the elementary school level is essential.

Additionally, we ask that MCPS revisit its current policy of guidance counselor staffing. The current methodology allocates for an additional .5 guidance counselor for schools over 700 students, which places larger schools well above the recommended ratio of 1 counselor for 250 students, particularly when a school reaches well over 700 students, as is the case with half of Walter Johnson's elementary schools. For example, with over 930 students, Ashburton's guidance counselors attend to roughly 100 students with IEPs and 504 plans, which require multiple meetings per year per student; participate in all 37 classrooms on a monthly basis; and attend to students' individual needs, including: suicidal ideation, self-harm, child abuse, homelessness, and trauma.

While we recognize that a ratio of 1 to 250 might not be attainable in the short term, we believe consideration should be given to additional guidance counselors once schools reach well over the 700-student mark. In large schools, kids are more likely to fall through the cracks. We were pleased to see the addition of counselor positions in the budget and request that you consider the needs of the overcrowded Walter Johnson cluster schools when allocating those positions. In particular, we believe that adding elementary counselor support within the Walter Johnson cluster, specifically an additional .5 counselor for each of Luxmanor, Farmland, and Ashburton, would be an effective way to significantly increase support in several of the largest schools in the county with diverse needs. Given these elementary schools are all in the same cluster, we believe there could be synergies in adding these .5 positions, with possibly one FTE serving multiple schools.

Additional administrative and content staff: Finally, as enrollment continues to increase, so does the administrative burden of running a school. We are grateful that Ashburton was restored its ASA this year. We urge the Board and MCPS to consider where other administrative staff at larger schools can help them meet the challenges of running schools that in many cases in the Cluster exceed the MCPS recommended school size. Additionally, we thank MCPS for including additional resources for training in the new curriculum, and we ask that you consider adding Math Content coaches to further support the transition, as well as consider the training of substitutes in the new curriculum.

Technology and Equipment: We have heard from teachers throughout most of our schools that there is a shortage of working copiers and scanners. As enrollment numbers grow, the number of copiers necessary to provide material for 600 students are not sufficient to service the needs of more than 800; the number of scanners necessary to upload documents for 2,000 students is not sufficient to manage the workload of 2,600 students. We urge MCPS to assess the technology needs of our overcrowded schools.

Key to Success 2: Resources for Special Education.

We in the WJ community are proud to have multiple programs supporting students with special needs. We note the budget increase in special needs education and ask that you consider our programs when allocating those resources.

As you know, Tilden MS stands as an outstanding example of how students with special needs can thrive in a public school setting when provided with an appropriate support system. As the number of Tilden students with special needs, including Learning for Independence and Asperger's Syndrome students, continues to grow, Tilden needs an additional counselor, additional special education paraeducators, and additional administrators to support these students so they can be successful.

Walter Johnson HS hosts both the countywide Gifted and Talented/Learning Disabled program and the countywide Asperger's Syndrome program, both with rapidly growing student populations. It maintains Learning for Independence and Learning & Academic Disabilities programs, while serving numerous students with a great variety of disabilities. Other schools with large separate disability programs have 2 Resource Teachers in Special Education; WJHS has only one. We ask you to allocate a second educator for this position, so that WJHS can send a RTSE into classrooms to observe students, as well as handling all the special education meetings and IEPs required. We also urge you to increase special education staffing – both teachers and trained paraeducators – so that staff are proportionate to the population of students with disabilities and can maintain classroom safety. Without added staff, these students will face an increased opportunity gap.

Finally, we note that even in a time of staffing increases, Kensington Parkwood has lost approximately 4 full time equivalents in the last several budgets, with special programming - including ESOL, Special Education, and Reading Initiative positions - especially hard hit. Given the recent management change at Kensington Parkwood we support their request, attached to restore those positions.

Key to Success 3: Safety of our students.

We all held our children a little tighter after learning of the tragic accidents late last year. We thank MCPS for recommending additional investments in this budget for the physical safety of our students. We have several specific requests to consider related to the safety of our students.

Lunch and Resource Monitors: We ask that as part of this effort on safety and security, MCPS address the need for more recess and lunch monitors to ensure that children are safe during this time. With elementary grade levels that exceed 150 students and recess space that is overcrowded, we fear that children are truly “playing at their own risk.” And part of a child feeling safe is knowing he or she is going to get a full meal. Without additional lunch staffing, we fear that the crowds can deprive students, particularly those on free or reduced meals, sufficient time to eat their lunch.

Portables: As part of its effort to increase security personnel on school campuses, we ask that MCPS pay particular attention to the security of schools that utilize many portables, such as the schools in the Walter Johnson Cluster. Many of our school communities are struck by the ease of access to portable classrooms, in contrast to the rest of the school campus, which requires passage of a locked door and an ID check. Regrettably, since portable classrooms appear to be the future of schools not only in our Cluster but throughout the County, we urge MCPS to conduct a comprehensive review at the security of these facilities, and to develop a protocol which would place the safety of students learning in exterior appendages to the building on par with those whose classes are within the building, including a review of fencing, lighting, electronic locks.

Security Personnel: WJ has grown very rapidly over the past few years, and yet the number of security staff members has not changed since our current principal arrived nine years ago. The school has added administrative staff, which was appropriate and appreciated, to address the large increase in student population, but the school has also added six portables in the last two years and is expected to add another three portables next year, as the student population continues to expand beyond the capacity of the building. While the five security staff members at WJ do an amazing job keeping our students safe in a building that still includes some tight stairwells and hallways from the 1950’s, some of which have had to become one-way only during the school day, we request that at least one additional security staff member be provided to WJ to help keep our growing population of students safe as they try to get from classroom to classroom and/or portable on time so that they can be in their seats ready to learn.

Bus safety: While we welcome MCPS’s stated commitment to see how we can improve walkability to school, as the county’s enrollment increases, so does the need for more buses and bus drivers. Too many of our kids report sitting in the aisles on overcrowded buses. Too many of our kids spend more than an hour on the bus, one way, to and from school, even for very short distances. The Luxmanor elementary school holding center is 2.3 miles from the Luxmanor school site. Elementary school children are arriving home in some cases 40 – 50 minutes after school has ended. We were therefore pleased to see a recommended increase in investment on transportation, and welcome the possibility of an app to help us know where our child is on his or her bus route. As traffic only seems to get worse in Montgomery County, we urge the Board to examine more closely the transportation needs in high density, high traffic areas and consider whether more routes are needed.

Emotional safety of students: First, we appreciate the Superintendent’s request for more FTEs for new mental health professionals in this budget request. We strongly support this request. We

are grateful to the Board for funding more counselors over the past several budgets; particularly for our largest schools this has made a huge impact. But more counselors are simply not enough. Students today are facing unprecedented challenges moving at speeds unknown to us when we were kids, thanks to the instantaneous nature of social media which both interconnects children and isolates them all at the same time. Every school needs more mental health resources. Every school needs not just counselors, but psychologists and social workers who can help in ways beyond what our amazing counselors can do. While Walter Johnson High School technically has a full-time psychologist, who is doing a tremendous job, she is pulled away from WJ one day a week to cover duties at another school. Given the growth in the school population, and the needs facing the school, we recommend that the psychologist be at WJ full time. In addition, WJ is in need of additional counseling and Pupil Personnel Worker positions, to meet the growing number of students' needs.

Key to Success 4: Preparing for a Future of Growth

Resources for Capital Planning. We get to spend a lot of time with our friends on the DCP staff thanks to the substantial growth and capital needs of the Cluster. And we are well aware that their workload has ballooned, and that planning for the reopening of several new high schools in the MCPS's recommended capital budget is going to stretch them further. The ongoing boundary analysis and the consideration of the conclusions in the final report, as well as the significant processing of soliciting community feedback that still needs to occur, will add to this already significant workload. By now we have spoken many times about our concerns about the reliability of the forecasting methodology being used in the boundary analysis and other capital decisions. We believe the solution is to provide Capital Planning with more resources to oversee these changes. We urge the Board and the Superintendent to make sure that DCP has the resources it needs to meet all of the obligations that you, that we, and that the circumstances of growth and development in the County have placed upon them.

Continued construction. While this may seem like a laundry list of "I want more!" it is actually a list of needs our schools are facing due to overcrowding. And WJ Schools are not unique in facing overcrowding; schools to the east, south, west, and north of us are all experiencing record growth due to neighborhood turnover but also due to substantial development and building. You only have to follow the forest of cranes in Bethesda, Rockville, Silver Spring, Wheaton and everywhere in between to understand. And with the upcoming buildout of the White Flint, Lyttonsville and Kensington Sector Plans, as well as new plans just approved by the County Council, such as the Grosvenor/Strathmore Minor Master Plan Amendment, the White Flint 2, Rock Spring and Bethesda Downtown Plans, as well as the development plan for the WMAL property, more growth is coming upon us fast.

I know you understand that. I also know that it is not the Board of Education, or Dr. Smith, or MCPS staff, that makes the decisions to allow the construction of tens of thousands of new homes, more than 20,000 in the WJ Cluster alone, that is driving so much of the growth in our Cluster.

Therefore, we stand ready to take our message, that schools need to be fully funded, to the Council. Now is not the time to cut school funding. Now is the time to invest in our kids' futures.

The WJ Cluster is pleased to support the Superintendent's budget. On behalf of the nearly 10,000 students, their families, teachers, neighbors, and friends in the Walter Johnson Cluster, thank you for the work you do and for the opportunity to testify before you today.